

Ashes of the Fugitive

by Jonathan Olvera

It had been eight weeks since I first went on the run. Eight weeks since the rockets fell, since the sky above Tehran burned with fire and smoke, since I crossed the line from man to monster. I had made a terrible decision—to misuse the special equipment provided to me by someone I once trusted. It was a secret, something I never should have touched.

A computer program, nothing more than lines of code sold to me for \$32,000, had transformed me into the architect of destruction. A simple login, a set of instructions, a digital push of a button, and missiles screamed across the horizon, striking the airport and reducing it to blackened steel and scorched bodies.

My daughter, Dkaumi, had seen it all from our apartment window. Her small face pressed to the glass, she had whimpered as the towers of smoke climbed into the heavens. “Dad, why is the sky on fire?” she asked.

Her voice still echoed in me, cutting sharper than the roar of any explosion.

I couldn’t answer her. I couldn’t answer anyone. What could I say—that I had destroyed my own country for money? For promises of escape? For thirty-five thousand dollars that now felt like cursed blood money?

The night we fled, I told her, “Things are complicated, Kumi. I had to do it. These men... these evil men cannot keep running our home.”

But what I didn’t admit was that I wasn’t sure who was evil anymore. Them—or me.

Now, hunted like an animal, I sped down Iran’s back roads, always searching for valleys, ravines, any scrap of wilderness that could conceal us. Helicopters thundered overhead, their spotlights combing the earth like fingers of God searching for my shame.

“Oh my God, Dkaumi!” I cried as we drove. “We’re going to be hunted like animals!”

Her little voice cracked. “Dad, what happened? Why are they following us? Why are there helicopters in the sky?”

I wanted to shield her from everything, but there was no shield anymore. Only the truth: I had turned our lives into a nightmare.

My sister Klujin had seen us fleeing. She had trailed us for days, sometimes visible in my rearview mirror, other times vanished like a ghost. I didn’t know if she

wanted to help me or turn me in. Her presence gnawed at me, feeding the nausea in my gut.

I had ruined my life. I was fucking ruined.

The thought consumed me. I needed a firearm. I needed bullets. Every shadow felt like a pursuer. Every knock on a door could be the one that dragged me away in chains. I wasn't a father anymore—I was a fugitive.

The guilt pressed down harder than the helicopters above. How could I atone for a crime so immense it would echo through history? Perhaps confession was my only way forward. Perhaps throwing myself on the mercy of the world would grant me a sliver of amnesty.

But who grants mercy to someone like me? A man who destroyed an airport, who killed hundreds of civilians, who sent families into unending grief—all for money?

Nobody cares about people like me.

I told Dkaumi, almost in a whisper, "Nobody cares about us anymore, Kumi. Nobody."

I collapsed once, right on the floor of a safehouse. Hands over my head, I whimpered, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

The cell phone burned in my hand. Should I call for help? Should I surrender? The emergency line stared back at me on the screen, waiting.

And then—
Boom. Boom. Pow.

Another wave of explosions tore through the night. My ears rang. My people screamed in the distance. Men, women, children burned alive. I pressed the phone to my ear but heard nothing but static and cries of agony.

"God save us," someone screamed.
"Allah, Allah, have you forsaken us?"

Their voices became my punishment. My tears dripped onto the cracked screen as I whispered, "What have I done? What am I going to do?"

Hours later, desperate and delirious, I dug into the green grass outside with my bare hands. Beneath the dirt was plastic sheeting—hidden caches from the years of scarcity. I clawed until I made two shallow holes. One for myself, one for Dkaumi.

"This will hide us," I muttered, though I knew it was madness. My fingers bled, my nails bent back, but I dug anyway.

Every moment, I fought the urge to throw my cell phone into the ravine. Yet I also thought of calling my sister, of begging her to rescue Dkaumi even if she left me to

rot. But the only certainty was that I needed money. More money for a pistol. More money for ammunition. Survival now had a price tag.

I was no longer Jonathan. No longer even the father my daughter once trusted. Everyone would soon know me as **Kaveh Shirazi**—the traitor of Iran. The world would spit my name.

I hadn't known the missiles I launched would be so powerful. I thought it was sabotage, disruption, nothing more. But the ground itself shook for days, and the airport—the pride of our nation—was reduced to rubble. The heart of Iran stopped beating that day, and I was the one who plunged the knife.

Sometimes, I thought the helicopters circling above ignored me on purpose. Not out of pity, but out of cruelty. As though I was already beneath notice, a cockroach scurrying under their boots. A maggot in the dirt. Too pathetic to even kill.

"Oh my God," I thought, clawing at the ground. "I'm such a loser."

I stared out across the horizon at the skeletal remains of the airport, the crumbled structures that once represented progress, connection, pride. And now? Now they were ash. And I had done it.

One man. One selfish, cowardly man, willing to burn everything for \$35,000 and a chance at escape.

Dkaumi stirred beside me, clutching her rabbit, whispering in her sleep. "Dad..."

Her innocence was the sharpest knife.

I had betrayed my nation. I had betrayed my daughter. I had betrayed myself.

And yet I kept running.